

SPEAK NOW: MEMORIES OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS ERA
RECORDING SESSIONS

Rims Barber

Moderated by LeAnna Welch-Dawson

Saturday, June 18, 2011

William Winter Archives and History Building

Jackson, Mississippi

MISSISSIPPI DEPARTMENT OF ARCHIVES AND HISTORY
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Scope Note: The Mississippi Department of Archives and History in conjunction with the 50th Anniversary of the Freedom Rides and to complement the Department's exhibit "*Freedom Rides: Journey for Change*" conducted recording sessions with local citizens to gather oral memories of the Civil Rights Era. The participants were also given the opportunity to have their photograph taken in front of the exhibit. The recordings were conducted in the spring and summer of 2011 at the William F. Winter Archives and History Building in Jackson, Mississippi.

DAWSON: Speak Now recording number 017. This is LeAnna Welch-Dawson with the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. Today's date is Saturday, June 18, 2011. Now sharing his Civil Rights Era memories is Mr. Rims Barber. Welcome.

BARBER: Thank you.

DAWSON: What would you like to share with us today?

BARBER: Oh my goodness. You're starting...well I came to Mississippi, I have a document that says I got here officially on the 17th of July 1964. The document is because when I arrived in Canton, Mississippi I was met by the police who said you have to come and register with the city, you know, all aliens have to do that or something to that effect and so I did and I have a little card that I have, that shows that I have registered as an outsider. And I'm, I'm still an outsider because my grandma wasn't born here, you know. But that was my introduction to the police state that was 1964. And as, as we went around doing voter registration, knocking on doors, police cars would follow us and pause in the street and run their motors, so that when you knock on the door of a house, people would peep out through the blinds or the curtains, they'd see a cop car out there and they'd say, "Come back some other time, you know, I don't wanna talk to you if they're watching," you know. So it, you know, slowed us down, made life more difficult.

But, you know, I, I had to re-learn a whole bunch of things, you know. Things that...you know I'd run into things that didn't make sense. One of my most vivid memories is walking down the street going to the drug store or something, you know, something inane, all by myself, and a little lady dressed like she's just come from the sewing circle at the church, walking the other way coming toward me, when she gets about three or four feet from me, she grimaces and gives me the finger. Now you know, my mother wouldn't do such a thing you know. It did not compute. What is the matter with this lady that she is—has—that kind of a visceral reaction to my walking down the street going to the, to the drug store? Or similarly, one time when I was in the Madison County jail, the sheriff walks in, looks at me and I can see him going through some kind of mental changes, then he comes over and whops me! And I see him going through mental changes again so he can go home and hug his wife, pat the kids on the head and you know that sort of thing.

But how...how people, you know, what was it culturally that did this to them? You know I just...it was very difficult to understand, and, and yet I found in, in the Black community you know, such welcoming, you know sharing of their lives, and they had little, but they'd share it, "You come in. Can I get you a cup of coffee, some tea, some, something, a drink of water?" You know maybe, "All, all I have is water, but I want to share,"

and “Yes, let’s sit down and talk.” And I guess most of what we did as community organizers was just talk to people about their hopes and yes, their fears, but what their dreams and their concerns were, what they wanted for themselves and their children and their community, and help them figure out that yes, they could make those things happen. I mean, life for many of the underclass serf...people who were essentially serfs, in a feudal society, life was something that happens to you. It’s not something that you create. But you can help people change that sense of who they are and what life is, so that they become the creators of it rather than simply accepting what happens to them, and watching people grow and develop is just a wondrous experience, I mean I’ve just been so blessed just to watch people become somebody. From sitting in the projects and, you know, moaning about the heat and everything else and, to going out and becoming involved in the creation of the Head Start program or you know a literacy program or whatever it was that that particular person really cared about. Getting registered to vote, you know, people just taking charge of their lives, and watching them grow and develop it’s just a marvelous experience. I mean a great number of people who started in that kind of serfdom, socioeconomic situation rose to be pretty middle class, creative managerial type folks who could manage not only their families and their homes but their communities as elected officials, as leaders of programs, as developers of wonderful things for their children and others. So that, you know, my memories are really good in that sense. This was a people’s revolution. I mean it was the, you know, you know I love John Dittmer’s *Local People* book. That the best one on Mississippi Civil Rights, in that it was the local people who made it happen. It was not the outside agitators who did it, although you know, if you, in this building if you go read the Sovereignty Commission files you’d think that we were the...ones that did it, right?

DAWSON: Right.

BARBER: Only White people could come up with the some awful things that we did. There was a, there was an elder in a church who confronted me and publicly and said, “Didn’t you come to Canton in 1964 and ruin our race relations?” I said, “I think you got the year right.” That gets back to that other thing where I started was I just didn’t understand those folks, couldn’t help it.

DAWSON: What made you want to get involved?

BARBER: What made me want to get involved? I don’t, I’m not good at psychological histories of what did it, I had a bunch of good experiences in my family, I learned that I was loved in spite of myself and therefore I could love others and it, there didn’t have to be a criteria, you know. It’s not, are you the right weight, or the right color, or the right accent or the right, whatever, people are people and I, you know, I learned that as a young person. And I had some experiences where I got to see other cultures and learn from people.

And when I...read the general invitation to come and participate I said, "Yeah, I can do that." And when I got here I found that it was what I needed to do. And, I'm the one that stayed, you know. So I'm still here. 'Cause it ain't over 'til it's over.

DAWSON: Right. So were you, were you a member of CORE or?

BARBER: I worked with CORE. I was with the Delta Ministry of the National Council of Churches. I worked in Canton, which was in the CORE district. I worked with Dave Dennis and George Raymond and those people...C. O. Chinn, Annie Devine...the basic CORE folks.

DAWSON: Did y'all work with the school, with the schools or anything? Or youth groups or...

BARBER: I worked on school desegregation, for example. In the beginning knocking on doors and sitting and talking to people and seeing what they wanted to do, and helping them do it. And then, the first year that the schools were integrated in Canton, I did a lotta transporting, because there were no, no school buses to take kids across town. It was not a busing plan. It was "You can...you, we'll let you come here if you can get here," you know.

DAWSON: Okay.

BARBER: And so, I picked up half dozen kids every morning and took them to the elementary school. On, on the first day of school in Madison, Mississippi I got a, a "reckless driving while parked" ticket. Well, I had driven a carload of young Black teenagers to Madison High School and as I was parked there waiting for them to come back out, the cop decided he was gonna give me a ticket and he couldn't think of anything else to put down on the ticket except reckless driving.

DAWSON: Were you married, had children during this time?

BARBER: Hhmm?

DAWSON: Were you married, did you have children during this time?

BARBER: No. I, my children were born just a few years later.

DAWSON: How did your wife feel about your involvement? Was she involved also?

BARBER: Yeah. I'm, I'm...I'm not going through that history, that's...that's off limits.

DAWSON: Okay.

BARBER: You know, what...I've just seen such wonderful changes, you know, I worked with...the people who in, in, in the NAACP legal defense fund who did the lawsuits on school desegregation. I'm deeply disappointed that Jackson schools have become, you know, so Black rather than integrated. I mean, we had four kids went through the Jackson schools. And you know, at most they were at least 20 percent White, in those years and that's manageable, but there's some tipping point at which everybody else just left.

DAWSON: Right.

BARBER: There's almost nobody above, you know, elementary level in the White community going to school in Jackson. Now, in Clinton you have reasonably integrated classrooms I believe, and they do in Madison. So the suburbs are now doing better than the, than the core city, in that regard. I worked with a lot of the kids who went through the whole desegregation process and for many of them it was a very stressful and difficult time. I mean those kids just are wonderful. When...when the governor made his inane remark about school desegregation in Yazoo City, I immediately called up the young Black woman, who was the one young Black woman who desegregated the Yazoo City public schools two years before total desegregation came and went through hell that first year. She was trying to survive, you know, as the only black face in a sea of white. It was pretty difficult. So I worked with the kids trying to help them overcome the problems they faced, to be strong inside and you know, and understand the purpose in what they were doing and keep plugging away, you know. That, that young woman, 20 years later came up to me in some meeting we were, we were both at and said, "I hated you." Of course, you know, she'd changed in 20 years and I said, "Who are you?" You know, then I figured out she was that little girl, okay, now, alright, now I understand what you're talking about. But she's become a professional woman, with a Master's degree and you know, confidence and doing good work in her community and it's just wonderful to see.

DAWSON: Well, good.

BARBER: But you know, Haley didn't understand what those kids went through, and won't ever understand it. I mean I got thrown out of Yazoo City twice by the police chief, and I know what it's like...I don't know what else you want, wanted to talk about.

DAWSON: Just, you were just invited to share your memories so...

BARBER: Okay.

DAWSON: Anything else you want to share?

BARBER: I don't know. I mean you all got in your archives my life history, in various forms and I've promised to give a bunch of other stuff to, when, when it's time.

DAWSON: Okay.

BARBER: You know but I'm...

DAWSON: Right.

BARBER: I can't quit yet.

DAWSON: Good.

BARBER: I'm only, this is my 75th year and I get to retire I think when I'm 80.

DAWSON: That young?

BARBER: Yeah, then I'm gonna check out.

DAWSON: Well, thank you for your time today.

BARBER: Thank you.

DAWSON: Okay.

END OF RECORDING

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